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ABSTRACT

This paper grew out of the collaborative relationship that emerged from in-class modeling of student-centered writing approaches as participating teachers and a consultant/researcher began to explore ways to increase the length of fourth-grade writing. The paper reports on a small study in fourth-grade writing aimed at increasing the length of student writing. According to the paper, one goal was to find a way to encourage student writers to compose longer and more meaningful pieces, and additionally, to develop personal experience narratives and the writing process. The limited focus of the paper is to tentatively explore one approach to increasing the quantity of writing produced in one session. The paper reports that students (n=17) in two classrooms were assigned the same writing topic and given similar instructions for prewriting activities. The paper states that in both classrooms the researcher modeled the idea that an elevator to assist people with disabilities to reach the second floor would be a way to improve physical access to the school for all people. It explains that after brainstorming in groups of three or four students came together as a single unit to share ideas; one class was asked to write individually for 10 minutes (Time) while the other was instructed to individually write between a half and three-quarters of a page at minimum (Length). It states that papers were collected and words were counted for each paper. It finds that the Time group produced a mean of 99.88 words per piece, while the Length group produced a mean of 84.67 words per piece. Findings suggest that students writing first drafts in strategic writing situations may improve their time on task by being given instructions to write for a set amount of time rather than a set length parameter for writing assignments. (Contains 16 references and 2 tables.) (NKA)

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It's About Time!

Increasing the Length of Student Classroom Writing Without Setting Length Constraints

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It's About Time!

Increasing the Length of Student Classroom Writing Without Setting Length Constraints

Introduction

This paper is one of the outgrowths of a developing partnership between one small, rural West Texas elementary school district and a university professor. Due to low writing scores in fourth-grade, the Regional Educational Service Center serving the school asked me to work with the faculty and students at Lockwood elementary school. The school was searching for a way to improve writing across the curriculum with a concentration in fourth-grade because fourth-grade is the first testing grade and the grade that caused the Texas Education Agency to designate Lockwood (all names and places are pseudonyms) as low performing in the first place.

In my role as writing consultant to the school I engaged in a larger study of the impact of reflection on teaching and learning, a large qualitative study seeking to understand more about the role of reflection in professional development. In addition to scheduled professional development sessions and classroom modeling sessions

where I demonstrated student centered writing processes six teachers volunteered to participate in focused reflective discussions called Reflective Practice Discussion Groups (Passman, 2002, In Press-a). This paper is grew out of the collaborative relationship that emerged from in-class modeling of student centered writing approaches as participating teachers and I began to explore ways to increase the length of fourth grade writing. This paper reports on a small study in fourth grade writing aimed at increasing the length of student writing. While there are some significant limitations to the design of this study, the results lead to further questions regarding the way that writing is taught in school.

One of the project goals was to find a way to encourage fourth-grade student writers to compose longer and more meaningful pieces. In addition we focused on developing personal experience narratives (Murray, 1991), and the development of the writing process (Calkins, 1994; Emig, 1977; Graves, 1975; Murray, 1997) as a way to improve the quality of writing in the classroom. The limited focus of this paper is to tentatively explore one approach to increasing the quantity of writing produced in one writing session. There is no attempt to address issues of the quality of that writing.

Related Literature

Emig (1977) argues that writing is a unique way of thinking. One consequence of this position is that writing is a responsible act of communication between author and audience (Bakhtin, 1993). Graves (1975) was among the first to notice that the act of writing is a process in which the author engages in order to discover what it is one has to say. In Graves' terms authors cannot pay closer attention to the product of writing than is paid to the process of drafting, revising, and editing. Perl (1979) noted that learning to revise rather than merely edit is a process of coming to understand what it is that is really being said by an author. In short, we understood writing to be closer to a process model in which students develop the ability to think and communicate through written language.

Workshop models of writing (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994) are based on and actively support the process view of writing. Implicit within process models of writing is the idea that frequent and sustained practice at the craft of writing is a significant factor in developing the sense of authorship in students. Proponents of the workshop model argue that students engaged in frequent and sustained opportunities to write may develop a stronger sense of

authorship by virtue of their long-term engagement with writing (Daniels & Zemelman, 1985). With acknowledged authorship comes the sense of developing a responsibility to an audience (Bakhtin, 1993).

In an important meta-analysis of what works in the teaching of writing Hillocks (1986) suggests that much of what is considered the mainstay of writing instruction such as the direct teaching of grammar on one side and free writing on the other have not much of an influence on the production of quality writing. What appears to be effective is a multi-tasking approach including teaching of rhetorical strategies and making skills and mechanics visible to students (Passman, 2001).

We became interested in differences between assignments based on time to write and assignments based on length. Is there a difference in student production in terms of words written if assignments, especially those designed to teach rhetorical strategies to students, are made in terms of time or length? In short, we were interested in the impact on students when strategies are taught, skills introduced, and students are given frequent and sustained time to practice writing as a part of a formal curricular approach to teaching writing.

Methodology

This study was conducted at the Lockwood Elementary School, a small rural school in West Texas. There are two fourth-grade classrooms in the school comprising a total of 18 students, six girls and twelve boys. One student was excluded from this study due to his severe difficulties with writing. The total number or participants in this study then is 17. Students are evenly divided between the two classrooms. The sample used in this study is a convenience sample, based on access to classrooms in the school. No attempt was made to control for other variables. This is clearly a small sample size leading to some important limitations for the generalizability of the results. It is important to keep in mind that these data suggest avenues for future systematic analysis and not definitive conclusions.

Students were assigned the same writing topic and given similar instructions for prewriting activities. In both classrooms students were asked to address concerns that could be solves through implementation of a physical change in the building to improve access to the school building. In both classrooms I modeled the idea that an elevator to assist people with temporary or permanent disabilities to

reach the second floor would be a way to improve physical access to the school for all people.

Students in both rooms were divided into groups of three or four on a self-selecting basis to brainstorm lists of ideas that they could suggest to the district superintendent in order to improve school access. The whole class then came together as a single unit to share ideas. One class was then asked to write individually for ten minutes (TIME) while the other was instructed to individually write between a half and three-quarters of a page at minimum (LENGTH). With the LENGTH group it is important to emphasize that the minimum nature of the length requirement was emphasized. Students were explicitly granted permission to write more than the minimum half to three-quarters of a page. Both groups were given ten minutes to write.

Papers were collected and words were counted for each paper. In order to insure accuracy of the count each paper was counted twice by independent counters. Both counters needed to agree on the word count in order for that count to be included. When necessary, papers were recounted until both counters agreed upon a number. There was one paper produced by a student labeled learning disabled that no one

was able to count and was discarded. A total of 17 papers were included in this report.

Discussion

We began our project by asking students to frequently write for authentic purposes and to write over extended periods of time. Strategies and skills were also being introduced as a part of a comprehensive strategic writing approach. In using the term authentic we follow Newmann and his colleagues (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993) when they point out that in order for an assignment to be authentic it must have two significant features: 1) authentic assignments have value beyond school, and 2) an audience beyond the teacher. We believed that by engaging our students in authentic writing while introducing both rhetorical strategies and mechanical skills we might see longer and more meaningful writing, unencumbered by false or imposed constraints such as length as a determining factor.

In our classrooms students wrote for an audience beyond teacher. Through use of the author's chair (Calkins, 1994) students wrote primarily, although not exclusively, for an audience of their peers. Students, for example, wrote for parents and community

residents by organizing and presenting an "Author's Tea" in March. In order to give assignments that had a value beyond school we were careful to choose real-life issues, encourage students to engage in personal experience narratives, or to let students choose topics on which to write. In order to keep students engaged in writing during the teaching of rhetorical strategies to students we never assigned writing topics based on length, rather we limited students to a time frame in which they were to write. During strategic writing periods we began a writing exercise by telling students the time available for writing, the time to start, and told them when to stop.

In our experience, among the first questions a student asks when assigned a piece of writing is, "How long does it have to be?" We wanted to break away from that model, a model of length, and create a model that was driven by the author's implicit responsibility for the completion of his or her thoughts (Bakhtin, 1993). We hypothesized that by not assigning length as a predetermined variable, students would learn to understand the writing process as bordered by meaning rather than by length. We also hypothesized that, in the early stages of supplanting the length paradigm with one that relied on intrinsic motivation, a transitional period of refocusing taken-for-granted ideas

about school and school writing would have to be replaced (Passman, In Press-b). For this reason, we concentrated on the length of the student writing for this study and ignored the quality of that writing.

The TIME group produced a mean of 99.88 words per piece while the LENGTH group produced a mean of 84.67 words per piece (See table 1). A Students t-Test was performed to determine if there was a significant difference between means. The t-Test was chosen as a comparative test of small samples. The results of the t-Test indicate that at the 95% confidence level there was a significant difference between the means of TIME and LENGTH (See table 2).

Means of TIME and LENGTH were compared by gender using an independent samples t-Test. No significant difference was found between male and female writers. It was interesting to note, however, that the boys in both conditions wrote more than the girls. This may be due to the fact that there were twice as many boys than girls in this particular sample group. No practical significance is attached to this finding.

It was interesting to note that anecdotal observations of the TIME group found that students appeared engaged in writing from the time they were told to start to the time they were told to stop. In the

LENGTH group anecdotal observations found that three students drew lines or made other delimiting marks at half or three-quarters of the page and wrote to those marks and no more. It is also interesting to note that in the TIME group all but one student was writing when the direction to stop came. In the LENGTH group, all students but one had finished writing before the instruction to stop was given.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Our findings indicate that students writing first drafts in strategic writing situations may improve their time on task by being given instructions to write for a set amount of time rather that to set a length parameter for writing assignments. It was not surprising to us that students continued to ask how long a given paper must be even those in the TIME group. Our experience is that writing is often assigned by establishing a minimum length. Students that understand how to "play school" clearly understand the length question to be appropriate.

There are significant limitations to this study. The sample size is small as well as being a convenience sample, therefore no generalizability should be assumed to other situations or classrooms. No attempt was made to look at the quality of the writing in this

study, only the potential impact on quantity. No claims are being made that by making assignments as time controlled we will see an improvement in quality of writing. In spite of the limitations of the study, however, we believe that assigning writing "time" may be a significant motivator to engage students in the act of writing and to increase their time on task writing behavior.

This study is highly suggestive of future avenues of research in both time and length in writing. Getting a clearer handle on the impact of time on the quantity of writing produced is an important line of inquiry that we may pursue. Additionally, looking at how time impacts the quality of writing is also an important avenue for further inquiry.

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Table 1

TIME and LENGTH Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Std Error of Mean
TIME	8	99.88	35.77	12.65
LENGTH	9	84.67	25.04	8.35

Table 2

Students t-Test Comparing
TIME and LENGTH Writing Assignments

	t	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)[a]	Mean Difference
TIME	7.898	7	.000	99.88
LENGTH	10.142	8	.000	84..67

[a] *p>0.95*

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